

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Historical, Strategic, and Technological Context

WHAT IS THE FUTURE of land warfare, and of the world's ground forces more generally? What can we realistically expect and project about the implications of interstate combat, civil conflict, and major humanitarian catastrophes for the world's armies in the decades to come?

In recent years the U.S. national security debate has been turning away from these questions. Fatigued by Iraq and Afghanistan, rightly impressed by the capabilities of U.S. special forces, transfixed by the arrival of new technologies such as drones, and increasingly preoccupied with a rising China and its military progress in domains ranging from space to missile forces to maritime operations, the American strategic community has largely turned away from thinking about ground combat.¹ This is actually nothing new. Something similar happened after the world wars, the Korean War and Vietnam War, and Operation Desert Storm in 1991, as well. That last time, the debate shifted to a supposed revolution in military affairs. Many called for a major transformation in U.S. military forces to respond to that presumed revolution, until the 9/11 attacks returned military analysis to more practical and immediate issues. But now the strategic debate seems to be picking up about where it left off at the turn of the century—except that in the intervening fifteen

years, remarkable progress in technologies such as unmanned aerial systems has provided even more grist for those favoring a radical transition in how militaries prepare for and fight wars.

Much of this debate is welcome. Even if futurists understandably tend to get more wrong than right in their specific recommendations, a debate in which they challenge existing Pentagon rice bowls is preferable to complacency. As long as the burden of proof is on those who would dismantle proven concepts and capabilities when proposing a whole new approach to military operations and warfare, a world of too many ideas is preferable to a staid, unimaginative one of too few. The history of military revolutions suggests that established superpowers are more likely to be caught unprepared for, even unaware of, new ways of warfare than to change their own armed forces too much or too fast.

That said, pushback against transformative ideas will often be necessary. We have seen many unrealistic military ideas proposed for the post-World War II U.S. armed forces, from the Pentomic division of the 1950s, which relied on nuclear weapons for indirect fire, to the flawed counterinsurgency strategies of the 1960s, to the surreal nuclear counterforce strategies from Curtis Lemay onward in the cold war, to the dreamy Strategic Defense Initiative goals of the 1980s, to the proposals for “rods from God” and other unrealistic technologies in the revolution in military affairs debate of the 1990s. As such, wariness about new ideas is in order. Even in a great nation like the United States, groupthink can happen, and bad ideas can gain a following they do not deserve.

One hears much discussion today about the supposed obsolescence of large-scale ground combat. Official U.S. policy now leans in that direction too, as codified in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance and 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, largely as a result of frustrations with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Accordingly, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, released under the signature of then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, with a preface signed by President Obama, states flatly that “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”² The next year the Pentagon carried out a so-called Strategic Capabilities and Management Review that examined the option of reducing the Army to just 380,000 active duty soldiers.³ Subsequently the Ryan-Murray budget compromise of late 2013 and other considerations led to a less stark goal of 440,000 to 450,000 active duty soldiers. But the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review again dismissed

the plausibility of large-scale stabilization missions, though somewhat more gently, stating that “although our forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale prolonged stability operations, we will preserve the experience gained during the past ten years of counterinsurgency and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁴ The emphasis changed somewhat, but the fundamental point was the same. Ground warfare, or at least certain forms of it, was not only to be avoided when possible—certainly, that is sound advice—but not even truly prepared for. That may be less sound advice.

There are lots of reasons to believe that, whether we like it or not, ground warfare does have a future, and a very significant one at that. Nearly three-fourths of the world’s full-time military personnel, almost 15 million out of some 20 million, are in their nations’ respective armies.⁵ Most wars today are civil wars, fought within states by ground forces. Interstate wars are rare, but when they do happen, they generally involve neighboring states and generally involve a heavy concentration of ground combat. The United States may be far away from most potential conflict zones, putting a greater premium on U.S. long-range strike capabilities, including those of air and naval forces, than is the case for most countries. Yet the United States works with more than sixty allies and security partners, which tend to emphasize their own armies in force planning and tend to worry about land warfare scenarios within or just beyond their own borders. Iraq and Afghanistan revealed the limitations of standoff warfare and the problems that can ensue when the United States places severe constraints on its use of ground power (especially in the first few years of each conflict).

To paraphrase the old Bolshevik saying, we may not have an interest in messy ground combat operations in the future, but they may have an interest in us. Put differently, in contemplating the character and scale of future warfare, the enemy gets a vote, too.

As such, this book addresses two central questions. First, what is the future of land warfare, and of other possible forms of large-scale violence on land, in the coming decades? Second, what are the implications for the U.S. military, but particularly the U.S. Army and its three main components—the active duty Army, the Army National Guard, and the Army Reserve?

The U.S. Marine Corps falls partially within the scope of my analysis, but only partially. It has important capacities for substantial ground

operations, to be sure. Yet it is also a naval force, being part of the Department of the Navy, as well as an expeditionary force, with an emphasis on rapid responsiveness for multiple smaller contingencies around the world. As with the special forces, therefore, its mission is somewhat different from that of the main elements of the U.S. Army—and its future size and structure seem less in doubt as well. Nonetheless, it is certainly relevant to the general subject of this book and is frequently discussed in the pages that follow.

Since the cold war ended, the U.S. Army, like much of the nation's armed forces, has been built around the prospect of fighting up to two major regional wars at a time. That thinking has evolved, especially in the years when the United States was actually fighting two wars at once, in Iraq and Afghanistan (and in the process eliminating one of the threats on which the two-war scenarios had been premised, the government of Saddam Hussein). Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review began to shift the paradigm somewhat. The Pentagon's 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance and 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review moved further away from a two-war construct without jettisoning it altogether. Now, in the second of the two overlapping wars, it is deemed adequate to "inflict unacceptable costs" on an adversary.⁶ But the vagueness of the latter standard, deterrence by the threat of punishment, and changes in the international security order suggest that perhaps it is time to think afresh about the future of the U.S. Army and the other services. Planning for regional conflict will have to be a component of future force sizing, but with less specificity about likely foes than in the past and with a fuller range of considerations to complement the contingency analysis.

In this book, I begin with a blank sheet of paper about the future of land warfare and its implications for U.S. ground forces. The time frame is envisioned to go well beyond the current decade, into the 2020s and beyond. Where are future large-scale conflicts or other catastrophes on the world's land masses most plausible? Which of these could be important enough to necessitate the option of a U.S. military response? And which of these could in turn require significant numbers of American ground forces in their resolution?

Put differently, one frequently hears the adage that the United States does not have a good track record in predicting its future wars. Some even turn the saying on its head, saying that yes, we do have a good

track record—a perfect one, in fact—of getting the future wrong. Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, Korea, and indeed the world wars (not to mention the American Civil War) were not accurately foreseen by most strategists or planners.

Yet it is still important to examine how the configuration of worldwide threats, resources, centers of economic power, overseas political dynamics, and American strategic interests could produce conflict in the future. Strategists may not know when or where. But having a sense of the character and likely magnitude of any future conflict is essential. To paraphrase Eisenhower, moreover, the planning process is essential, even if any plans themselves that we manage to develop may not be precisely relevant. The alternative to analysis is to have future forces and Pentagon priorities determined by guesswork, bureaucratic and political inertia, and faddishness about new technologies, as well as by apparent new trends in conflict. We cannot predict the future. But for purposes of understanding the necessary size and shape of the future American military, including its ground forces, it is important to try to delimit it as much as possible. Historically, the United States has had several periods of coherent grand strategy—the Monroe Doctrine in the nineteenth century, victory in Europe first and in the Pacific later in World War II, containment in the cold war—and the nation as well as its allies should aspire to some coherence and cogency in the future as well.⁷

Some would counsel against preparedness for plausible military missions on the grounds that by being prepared, we might stray into conflicts that would have been best avoided. The 2003 Iraq War may be a recent case in point—a “war of choice,” in Richard Haass’s pithy depiction, that surely would not have been undertaken without a ready and fairly large standing military.⁸ But for every such case in U.S. history, there are probably several—including the two world wars and the Korean War—in which lack of preparedness proved an even greater problem. Moreover, in Iraq and Afghanistan, improper preparation for a certain type of fighting arguably made the initial years in both these wars far less successful than they might have been. Nor is it so clear that the United States is really spoiling for military action abroad. Americans may not be as restrained in the use of force as they often like to believe themselves to be. Yet at the same time, casualty aversion—and, more recently, a national souring on the kind of ground operations conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan—impose important constraints on action as well. Deliberately

staying militarily unprepared for plausible missions as a way of avoiding unsuccessful military operations abroad thus seems an unwise and highly risky strategy for the nation.

The time frame of the analysis is roughly 2020 through 2040—beyond the immediate budgeting challenges of the next appropriations cycle and five-year defense plan but not so far off as to be disconnected from current policy decisionmaking. Of course, there will be surprises between now and 2020, but some of the main drivers of international conflict can probably be identified.

Several countries loom large in the pages that follow. They include the world's largest, most industrialized, most militarized, and most populous nations. These states have the wherewithal to cause or experience security challenges that could pose systemic and large-scale disruptions to the global order and to American interests. Prominent examples include Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Mexico. What are the prospects that some of these countries could attack their neighbors, turn on themselves in large-scale civil warfare, suffer massive tragedies of some type, lose track of nuclear materials or other highly dangerous agents, or otherwise create a major international crisis that could not be easily ignored?

The analysis is not confined to traditional war scenarios. It also looks at complex humanitarian or relief activities of various types, some of which could involve an element of violence but others of which may not. It considers, for example, the chances that large, populous parts of certain countries or regions could suffer enormous tragedy that would dwarf the world's worst disasters to date and necessitate massive and sustained relief efforts. Such contingencies could have significant implications for the global order and thus should be factored into American strategic thinking and military force planning.

The policy implications of these kinds of analyses are very important. They go beyond predictable, if major, decisions about matters such as when to replace the Abrams tank, or how many brigade combat teams to retain in the U.S. Army Active and Guard force structure, or how to reshape and reconfigure such combat units. Even broader and more fundamental questions arise. Should the United States retain a large active duty army, as it has since World War II, or revert to an earlier model of a citizens' army, with greater reliance on the National Guard? Does the U.S. Army, along with the Marine Corps, need to retain a large-scale expeditionary

capability of dominating maneuver warfare virtually anywhere on Earth? How great should America's reliance on allies be in the future?

This book concludes with such questions. I ultimately argue for an army not unlike that described in the Obama administration's current plan—roughly a million soldiers, with about 450,000 on active duty. However, the mathematics behind this force-sizing construct are different from those of the Pentagon today. As noted, today's Department of Defense retains some elements of a two-war capability. My framework would not. Instead, it would plan for a single decisive war, combined with a possibly prolonged U.S. role in two simultaneous, multilateral missions, which could involve counterinsurgency, stabilization, deterrence, or a major disaster response. It might be described as a "1+2" paradigm, for one war, together with two smaller and more multilateral but potentially long and complex operations.

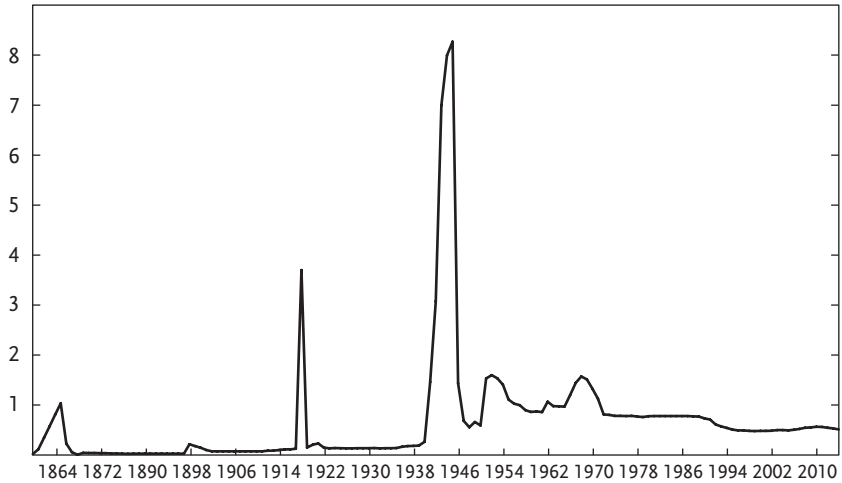
The book does not begin with that issue, however. Instead, after a brief review of the history of U.S. ground forces in this chapter and observations about U.S. grand strategy, I attempt to determine where large-scale violence or mayhem on land is most plausible and where it would be most consequential strategically. I then ask which contingencies could require a large-scale U.S. response with ground forces, rather than some other mix of military tools. In many cases the U.S. preference would surely be—and should surely be—to avoid direct involvement in any operation with U.S. forces if at all possible. However, in light of trends in military burden sharing worldwide and the irreplaceability of American leadership for many difficult military operations, it is quite plausible that in some cases, direct U.S. intervention as part of a coalition could prove necessary. The book concludes with implications for the force postures and budgets of the U.S. ground forces.

A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF AMERICAN GROUND POWER

Throughout its history, the United States has been influenced by dueling paradigms in sizing and shaping its ground forces. On the one hand, it has retained a somewhat romanticized image of the gentleman soldier, or the farmer-soldier, who takes up arms only when his country's security demands it and returns to civilian life once the shooting stops. This narrative, grounded in part in America's geographic luxury of being protected from potential foes by two oceans and in its history as a land of

Figure 1-1. Size of the U.S. Army throughout History, 1860–2014

Number of active-duty (uniformed) personnel (million)



Sources: U.S. Army Center of Military History, "American Military History," vols. 1 and 2 (www.history.army.mil/books); National WWII Museum, "By the Numbers: U.S. Military" (www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers/us-military.html); and U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States," Department of Defense Personnel (www.census.gov/compendia/statab/).

immigrants trying to escape the conflicts of the Old World, idealizes the local militia as much as the huge institutional army. It fit fairly well with reality in the United States, with a couple of very notable exceptions, for most of the country's first 140 years (see figure 1-1 on the size of the U.S. Army over the course of most American history).

This image of the reluctant warrior, and the demilitarized nation, accords with the life of the nation's first commander in chief and president, George Washington. General Washington was more than happy to resign his military commission after the Revolutionary War and resume the kinds of economic pursuits that had always been his main preoccupation. This preference for the plow over the sword earned Washington the nickname of the American Cincinnatus, after the Roman farmer-soldier who returned to his fields whenever military circumstances allowed.⁹ More broadly, Washington's example helped foster and reinforce the historical theme of a United States uninterested in Europe's wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and preferring to avoid them altogether, as typified in John Quincy Adams's admonition to Congress in

1821 about championing freedom abroad without actively seeking to impose it.¹⁰ Washington's Farewell Address had voiced similar views. It contained the following counsel to the union's states:

Hence, likewise, they will avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty. In this sense it is that your union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, and that the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other.¹¹

This attitude was reflected as well in the rapid demobilizations of the nation's armed forces after the Revolutionary War. One result was the poor preparedness of the nation for the War of 1812, when the army had fewer than 10,000 soldiers at the outbreak of hostilities.¹² The army roughly tripled in size in the course of that war but then declined back to a paltry 11,000 or so by 1830.¹³ Small standing forces were the norm in the Republic's early decades in general. Even the Mexican War in the mid-to-late 1840s typically involved only 5,000 to 10,000 U.S. troops out of a total ground force not much larger.¹⁴ At the outbreak of the Civil War, the U.S. Army numbered just 17,000 in all.¹⁵ After the Civil War, when some 3 million Americans served, mass demobilization occurred again.¹⁶ From the 1870s until the Spanish-American War, the full-time army numbered fewer than 30,000 soldiers. At century's end, the U.S. Army was less than a tenth the size of any major European power's ground forces.¹⁷

Despite occasional colonial ambitions from Mexico to Cuba and the Philippines, most of early U.S. history fostered the image of a nation that was not militarized in the way of European powers of the day. It is striking that by the late 1800s, the United States had become easily the second most populous major power after Russia, with an 1890 population of more than 60 million (Russia's was about 115 million; Germany's was about 50 million, with other major European states and Japan each in the range of roughly 30 million to 40 million). Yet the United States had only some 35,000 military personnel (including its Navy and Marine Corps), at a time when European powers typically had 200,000 to 750,000 men at arms.¹⁸

Subsequently, as the United States began to focus on building up stronger armed forces, much of the effort went into building a strong

battleship-oriented Navy rather than a more capable army. This dynamic, which began in the 1890s, was motivated by the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the global ambitions awakened by the Spanish-American War, and the political leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, among others.¹⁹

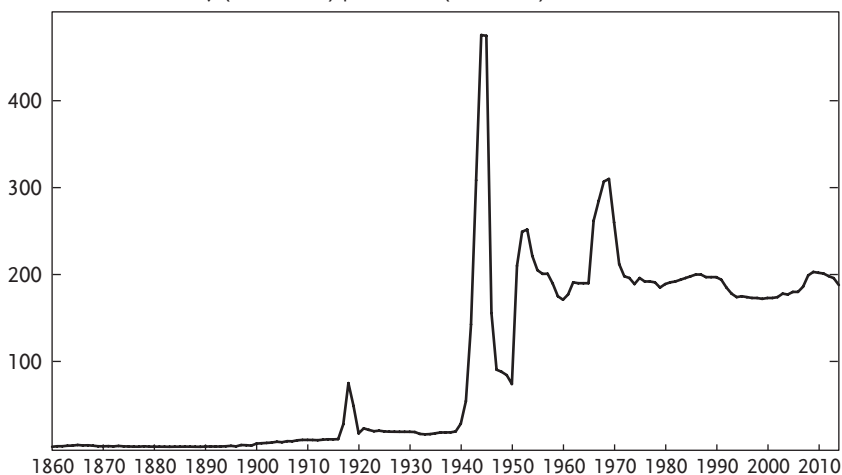
These realities changed in the twentieth century, of course, but only fitfully. At the outbreak of World War I, the U.S. Army was only about 100,000 strong. After the war it was scaled back again, to less than 140,000. In the early 1930s the U.S. Army ranked seventeenth in the world in size, behind the armies of Portugal and Belgium. It was generally strapped for funds for equipment and training as well. Indeed, while its school systems and certain other characteristics were becoming more professional and serious, the army of the 1920s and 1930s was in some ways the most disengaged from combat of any army in the nation's history since there were no longer battles against Native Americans (or Mexicans or Spanish) to wage.²⁰ Even as the decade of the 1930s unfolded and Europe lurched toward general war, in 1938 the U.S. Army was only 165,000 strong, nineteenth largest in the world.²¹ Much of the intellectual energy directed to America's armed forces was trained on new possibilities in naval and air combat, sparked by thinkers such as Billy Mitchell, rather than on ground armies.²²

Through the end of the nineteenth century, state militias were often a very real rival to the regular army for political support and resources. They had been important in the Revolutionary War and remained so thereafter. Indeed, in its Articles I and II, as well as in the Second Amendment, the Constitution not only made militias permanent but explicitly recognized and codified their independent standing separate from the army.²³ At the onset of the Spanish-American War, the sum total of all militias exceeded 100,000 personnel, or about four times the total number of soldiers in the Active Army.

Still, even as the concept of a National Guard began to develop, this force remained essentially a conglomeration of individual state-run units, poorly trained and poorly equipped. As the historian Graham Cosmas put it, "Guardsmen in the northeastern states spent much time and money on parties, picnics, drill competitions, and elaborate dress uniforms ornamented with plumes and gold braid." Realistic training was all but unheard of; even preparation for living in difficult field conditions was minimal.²⁴ These circumstances contributed to the Elihu Root reforms and the Militia Act of 1903, which supplanted the 1792 Militia

Figure 1-2. Size of the U.S. Marines throughout History, 1860–2014

Number of active-duty (uniformed) personnel (thousand)



Sources: National WWII Museum, “By the Numbers: U.S. Military” (www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers/us-military.html); U.S. Census, Statistical Abstract, National Security & Veterans Affairs (www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/national_security_veterans_affairs.html); Department of the Navy, “A Chronology of the United States Marine Corps,” vol. I (and subsequent reports) (<https://archive.org/stream/ACHronologyOfTheUnitedStatesMarineCorps1775-1934#page/n66/mode/1up/search/strength>).

Act, formalized the link of state militias to the War Department, and provided direct federal financing for these National Guard units. But even thereafter, improvement was gradual.²⁵

The evolution of the U.S. Marine Corps followed a broadly similar path to that of the active duty U.S. Army. It was a tiny force throughout the nineteenth century, generally in the range of 1,000 to 3,000 Marines in total at any time, not even exceeding 4,000 during the Civil War. Then it began its upward trajectory early in the twentieth century, reaching about 10,000 uniformed personnel by 1910, temporarily growing to about 75,000 during World War I, and then averaging in the 50,000 range in the 1920s before its rapid growth in World War II to nearly half a million Marines.²⁶ Since 1952, its force structure has been mandated by law to include three divisions and three air wings (though the definition of divisions and wings was not formalized legally).²⁷ In recent decades its strength has varied from 170,000 to 200,000 active duty uniformed personnel (see figure 1-2 on the U.S. Marine Corps).

Since World War II, the United States has maintained a degree of constant military vigilance and investment previously unknown in its history. Military spending has averaged more than \$400 billion annually since then, generally exceeding 5 percent of GDP during the cold war and sometimes approaching 10 percent.²⁸ But even through this period, the United States avoided becoming what Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg calls a garrison state.²⁹ Its investments went largely toward technology, including nuclear arms; its standing forces from all services combined generally numbered in the vicinity of 2 million, and even in the Vietnam period they barely exceeded 3 million.³⁰ These were significant numbers, to be sure. But when measured against a population base of more than 200 million citizens during most of this period, and in comparison with the forces of the Soviet Union and indeed many other states, America's military was not particularly large.

This, then, is the story of the reluctant superpower, the United States that prefers to focus on its own affairs and stay out of the world's problems whenever possible. But of course, the world wars provided important exceptions to this rule, as did the Civil War and a few other conflicts. Often even in the pre-superpower years, America's philosophy of nonintervention and neo-isolationism was observed more in the breach than in reality.

Indeed, over the last century in particular, there has been a competing image to the Cincinnatus/Washington ideal. The United States has been a committed power, bent on victory in its wars and ambitious in trying to forge an international order to its own liking, even in peacetime. The United States has hardly been reluctant to field whatever military capability seemed necessary to get the job done.

This other American military narrative comports with the industrial-scale army of World War II, which reflected a near-complete mobilization of the country's human and technological resources. In that conflict, the U.S. Army peaked at more than 8 million soldiers in total size.³¹ Even without huge standing armies, the modern American way of war has continued since that time. Although it has numerous variants, in general, it has emphasized mass, maneuver, and firepower, as Russell Weigley and others have described.³²

Indeed, this American tendency to field a strong and active military has deeper antecedents than many remember. Naturally, Civil War forces were huge. As noted, the total number of men-at-arms who served in the war may have approached 3 million.³³ But even the Continental Army

and related militia forces during the Revolutionary War were fairly large by certain measures. Although they typically numbered no more than 30,000 to 50,000 soldiers at a time in aggregate, that was out of a population base of only some 3 million. Since the effort lasted seven years, the total forces involved were significant in size by the standards of the day. Indeed, when one considers all types of militia fighters and short-timers from that conflict, some estimates have concluded that nearly half of all military-age eligible men actually fought against the British in the War of American Independence.³⁴

These competing tendencies in American defense planning reflected competing elements in American strategic thought as well. The nation really did avoid excessive overseas entanglements in its early decades, with the realist thinking of Washington, Adams, and Hamilton triumphing over the more activist outlooks of the likes of Jefferson in terms of how to deal with Britain, France, and the rest of the Old World.

Yet it would go too far to view the country as inherently pacifist or even isolationist in these early decades. Robert Kagan argues persuasively that historically the United States has been a “dangerous nation”—expansionist within North America in its early history, hegemonic in its view of its own role there, as reflected in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine (even if that doctrine was couched in antihegemonic terms, as a warning to European powers to stay away from the hemisphere), assertive throughout the Americas and parts of the Pacific thereafter.³⁵

In George Kennan’s metaphor, in the twentieth century, the United States was a sluggish giant, slow to awaken to challenges abroad, though resolute and fierce once finally shaken from its slumber.³⁶ Germany’s reoccupation of its Rhineland in violation of the Versailles Treaty in 1936 and its subsequent annexations and invasions of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland did not provoke significant American responses.³⁷ Even thereafter, as World War II intensified, the United States limited support for Britain, the Soviet Union, and other allies to the provision of weapons and supplies. It was not until December 1941 that it went meaningfully beyond the Lend-Lease program in its wartime role.³⁸ Yet once it did awaken, it knew no limits. And the expectation of victory in the nation’s wars has been axiomatic in U.S. military planning ever since.

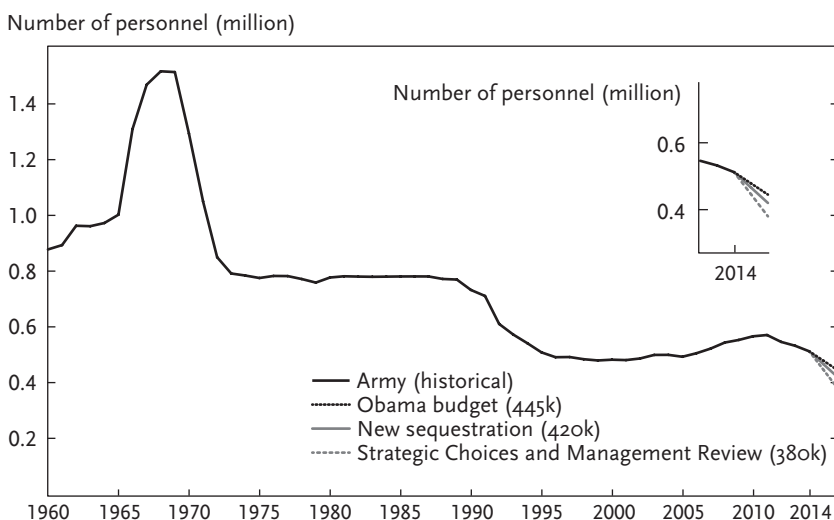
Avoiding appeasement and avoiding military unpreparedness were the two central lessons learned in World War II, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of American lives and tens of millions of others’. Since then, the

collective wisdom of the nation has been to avoid any replay of this tragic past. It is probably safe to say that in the modern American mind, the dangers of appeasement against an extremist foe are seen as greater than those of spiraling into war as a result of great-power competition.³⁹ Put differently, for most Americans, World War II instructs more powerfully than World War I, and not simply because it was the more recent and deadlier of the two conflicts. For a brief period, the weary nation seemed to make an effort to unlearn the lesson about the importance of U.S. engagement and deterrence as soon as World War II was over. Initially, it largely dismantled and demobilized its huge military. But the growing Soviet domination of Europe, the Chinese revolution, and the North Korean invasion of South Korea put an end to any real expectation that America could disengage or return to the days of a minimalist standing military.⁴⁰ Ultimately, the lessons of World War II were therefore reinforced by the cold war experience, which again seemed to underscore the importance of resoluteness in American foreign policy. During this time, the United States built up a large alliance system, deployed forces forward in Europe and Asia in particular, used military forces frequently for signaling and crisis response, and, with its allies, developed various additional approaches for containing the Soviet Union.⁴¹ These types of assertive practices continued after the cold war, even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, in military actions from the Balkans to Iraq to the Taiwan Strait and in the expansion of the NATO alliance, as well as in the deepening of commitments to many strategic partners in the broader Middle East.⁴²

Thus there are powerful, conflictual strands of thought and practice in U.S. national security policy. The notion of the citizen soldier, available to defend the nation when duty calls but otherwise inclined to focus on civilian activities, and its complementary view of the nation's army as a modest force in peacetime, has deep and powerful historical roots, especially through the outbreak of World War II. But the need for a large and powerful military was widely accepted when the nation went to war in revolutionary times and the Civil War, in World War I, and then again in World War II. Aspects of that thinking have influenced military policy ever since, for three-fourths of a century (see figure 1-3 on the size of the modern U.S. Army since 1960).

As such, it is difficult to argue that there is a clear natural state to which U.S. land forces should return if and when global conditions permit. Was there a halcyon period in the nineteenth century that should be

Figure 1-3. U.S. Army Annual Active Duty Personnel End Strength, 1960–2014



Source: DOD Personnel, *Workforce Reports & Publications* (www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp).

seen as the norm to which the country will revert someday? Or was this nineteenth-century image of a generally demilitarized America something that the nation can never wisely relive in a world that now needs its leadership? Since there is no prospect of a future power to play the hegemonic role that Britain arguably played for some of the nineteenth century, does that mean that the United States has no choice but to continue the role itself, even if perhaps in an evolving form? And if so, which types of scenarios must the U.S. Army, and the nation's armed forces more generally, be prepared to handle? It is to these questions that we ultimately turn.

THE SO-CALLED REVOLUTION IN MILITARY AFFAIRS, REVISITED

Central to the question of the future of land warfare is the way in which technology is changing, and with it the ways in which military force will be built, deployed, and used. Might robotics, high-technology standoff weapons, and new technologies in space and cyber realms change ground warfare radically? The U.S. Army's budget is already headed toward

Table 1-1. Army Annual Budget as Portion of All Department of Defense Spending^a

Billions of constant 2015 U.S. dollars

<i>Year</i>	<i>Army</i>	<i>DOD</i>	<i>Army (percent)</i>
1960	103,746	397,952	26.1
1970	161,596	509,096	31.7
1980	108,049	417,269	25.9
1990	148,362	537,801	27.6
2000	104,437	416,437	25.1
2010	263,650	752,678	35.0
2014	170,484	596,206	28.6
2019 ^b	122,446	520,672	23.5

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2015* (Washington, April 2014), pp. 90–96.

a. Based on the president's budget request for 2015 and not including Department of Energy national security spending. Totals include all enacted supplemental funding.

b. Does not include any supplemental funding estimate or projection.

constituting its smallest share of the Department of Defense (DOD) total in the modern era, as shown in the accompanying table 1-1—but in light of these changes, some would argue that the trend can go even further.

Of course, there have been many ongoing improvements in the weaponry utilized for ground warfare over the ages, from the steel and muskets of the Spanish conquistadores, to the cannons of Napoleon, to the railroads and bored rifles and machine guns of the later nineteenth century and World War I, to the combined-arms tank-heavy warfare of World War II and the Arab-Israeli wars.⁴³ Since then, advanced reconnaissance and precision-strike technologies have changed warfare dramatically as well, including the ways in which ground armies operate.⁴⁴ Along the way, weapons became far more lethal and longer range in character; armies spread out and became better at maneuver as equipment improved. Typically, in ancient times, a force of 100,000 fighters was densely concentrated for battle within a single square kilometer, according to the military historian Trevor Dupuy, but by Napoleon's day a force of that size occupied 20 square kilometers, by World War I some 250 square kilometers, and toward the end of the twentieth century as much as 3,500 square kilometers in some conflicts.⁴⁵ These processes of rapid innovation are impressive, and are ongoing.

Still, in regard to the revolution in military affairs (RMA) debate of modern times, the hypothesis of many advocates goes much further. They often promise a form of warfare that fundamentally alters the mix of forces that will be needed in future U.S. combat operations.

We have been here before. Most recently, in the 1990s, as the United States reflected back on the new ways of precision strike exemplified in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and took stock as well of the ongoing dot-com revolution in computers, a thesis emerged that warfare was experiencing a period of profound revolution. Harking back to previous periods of similar discontinuous change, as with the advent of the blitzkrieg, amphibious assault, strategic bombing, and nuclear weapons in World War II, proponents argued that the United States needed to fundamentally revamp its approach to war and the way in which it allocated resources within the DOD to avoid being caught unprepared in future combat.⁴⁶ The arguments varied from strategist to strategist.⁴⁷ But they tended to emphasize that the nation needed to invest less in some areas—most notably land forces, along with associated activities such as peacekeeping and maintaining a forward military presence abroad—to ensure it had resources for more pathbreaking approaches to military operations.⁴⁸

Much of this debate was healthy. Certainly, a superpower sitting atop the global distribution of military and economic power had at least as much to fear from complacency and inertia as from an overly enthusiastic desire for change. And the debate is also well grounded in history. Thinkers like Sun Tzu have for centuries reminded strategists to pursue clever new ways of fighting, even as other thinkers, such as Carl von Clausewitz, have pointed to the timeless qualities of combat and to the fog of war, which tends to disrupt most grand new plans and efforts to achieve quick and easy victories through the use of new tactics and new technologies. These debates have surfaced numerous times in American military history over the decades as well.⁴⁹

But the recent debate has also had its dangers. Modern America has had a fascination with technology that has sometimes led it astray in its thinking about what military force can and cannot accomplish. From the early proponents of aerial warfare as a supposedly decisive form of combat, to nuclear weapons theorists who believed in a possible strategy of preemption, to advocates of the Army's Pentomic divisions of the 1950s, which treated nuclear weapons simply as a more powerful version of artillery, to the emphasis on firepower that reinforced flawed

political assumptions about how to fight the Vietnam War, to overconfidence in how high technology might permit low-casualty and highly effective operations in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Kosovo in the 1990s, America's proclivity to trust technology has produced myriad mistakes. And much of the enthusiasm of the RMA community of the 1990s was clearly breathless and excessive itself. One heard numerous predictions. Ground combat vehicles were to routinely attain speeds of 200 kilometers per hour by 2010 while relying more on situational awareness than on armor for protection. All major areas of defense technology were to advance at a pace similar to those of computers, as reflected in Moore's law. Oceans were to become effectively transparent to advanced sensors. Space launch would become 90 percent less expensive. All these beliefs were later proven badly incorrect—and should have been seen to be wrong at the time they were initially offered.⁵⁰ One hears echoes of the 1990s RMA debate in the present strategic dialogue in the United States.

In my 2000 book on the subject, I broke down key areas of enabling military technology into some twenty-nine categories. Beginning with a literature review, and then subjecting my initial estimates to scrutiny by scientists at some of the nation's best weapons laboratories, I argued that of the twenty-nine, perhaps two were experiencing or likely to experience truly revolutionary breakthroughs.⁵¹ Those were computer hardware and software. The remaining categories of technology seemed likely to progress at modest rates. A subsequent section of the book, armed with these working premises, then examined a multitude of scenarios to reach provisional judgments about how many of them might become markedly easier (or harder) to handle in the future as a result of technological change and associated changes in military tactics and operations that the United States, its allies, and its adversaries might adopt.

The overall result of this analysis predicted, perhaps fairly unremarkably, that the kinds of wars the nation wound up preoccupied with in the 2000s—Iraq and Afghanistan, and other irregular conflicts—would remain difficult. Whatever technology offered, be it revolutionary or evolutionary, it would make the United States better at activities at which it already excelled, such as long-range precision strikes, and would help less in the kinds of urban and infantry combat that later typified its experiences in Mesopotamia and the Hindu Kush.⁵² To be sure, battlefield commanders and their troops did remarkable things in these conflicts. They developed major innovations in areas such as drone technology and

the creation of more responsive intelligence networks.⁵³ But they did not render the battlefield transparent or otherwise make it feasible for U.S. forces to dominate it through technology. The laws of physics continued to limit what sensors could accomplish in the complex terrain of the insurgent battlefield. Realities of engineering continued to make it necessary to produce large gas-guzzling vehicles for protection and mobility. The basic human need to walk the battlefield and to get to know the population in order to conduct proper counterinsurgency operations proved as timeless as ever. Not only the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan but also other countries with excellent militaries—perhaps most notably Israel—experienced similar challenges in this time period when confronting similar problems. Israel started to look for strategies emphasizing punishment and deterrence over decisive military victory, given the dilemmas involved in trying to defeat enemies equipped with even relatively modest technology, by the standards of the day.⁵⁴

There is little reason to revise these basic assessments today. A rethinking of my graphic from the 2000 book suggests the need for only modest change. In the area of drone technology, progress appears faster than I had forecasted, making for a grand total of three of twenty-nine categories that I would now label as progressing at a revolutionary pace. All other categories, to a first approximation, would seem essentially as predicted then.

Others have cautioned against predictions of radical change in the character of warfare as well. Barry Posen has referred to America's military dominance in the modern era as "command of the commons," suggesting that military operations in the open oceans and associated regions of air and space would play to U.S. strengths much more than other forms of combat might.⁵⁵ Stephen Biddle has argued that trends in technology are gradually placing a higher premium on excellence in everything from basic infantry skills to high-level integration of theater-wide operations. Modern war is becoming increasingly lethal and thus unforgiving to the unprepared, but it is not making ground combat irrelevant or obsolete.⁵⁶

There could be other reasons why the United States can or should focus fewer resources and plans on land forces and ground combat than it has done to this point. That question is taken up below, and in subsequent chapters. Certain specific innovations in military technology, discussed in chapter 5, will likely make a significant difference in ground operations in the coming decades. That is not, however, the same thing as making a revolution.

PURPOSES OF LAND POWER IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

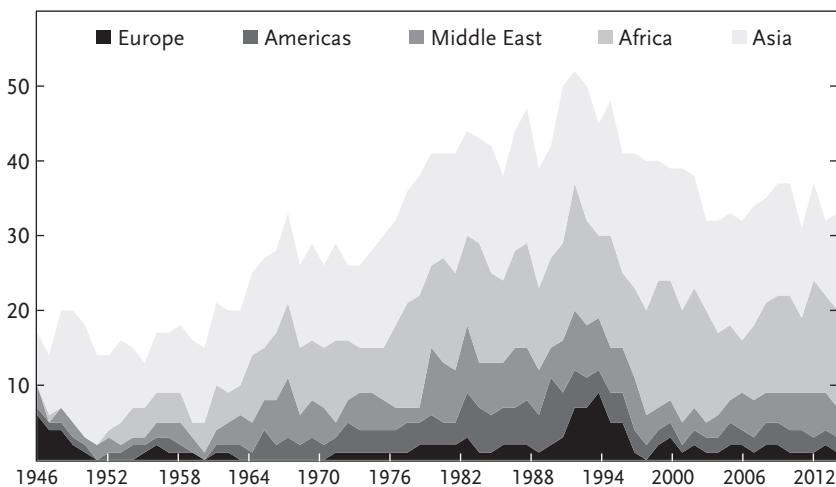
What are the core purposes of U.S. military power in general, and of U.S. land forces in particular? Many suggestions have been offered in recent decades, from creating a new world order free of interstate conflict to sustaining American primacy to preventing genocide to preempting proliferators. My analysis in this book is not, however, motivated by any such single organizing principle. Most have their utility; all have their limitations.

For example, some might argue that the United States and its allies might decide to put into effect what the first President Bush called the new world order, punishing any country that attacked another or sought to annex part or all of its territory. But not every interstate conflict is a serious threat to core U.S. national security objectives. Preserving and strengthening the international norm against cross-border aggression is a very desirable goal for American foreign policy in the future as well.⁵⁷ But conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, or Armenia and Azerbaijan, or the two Sudans was never serious enough to raise the strategic stakes to a high level for the United States. As such, Washington was generally correct to stay out of these conflicts militarily and seek to affect and restrain them in other ways. The same basic conclusion has been true in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015, though there the stakes were higher, in light of the location in Central Europe, the involvement of a nuclear-armed superpower in the conflict, and Washington's role in the 1994 Budapest declaration, which promised that the United States would have an interest in Ukraine's future security as an inducement for Kiev to give up its share of the post-Soviet nuclear arsenal.

Civil wars have been the most common, and deadly, of major armed conflicts in the modern world. (See figures 1-4, 1-5, and 1-6 on armed conflict by region, type, and intensity in the modern era.) They remain quite prevalent. Still, these kinds of wars can be very messy, and quite intractable, for any outside parties. The weight of historical evidence would seem to counsel against undertaking large-scale nation-building or state-building missions in most cases because of the high costs and uncertain prospects. It is also worth noting that the costs of UN or regional peacekeeping operations *after* peace accords are struck do seem more commensurate with the strategic stakes and risks associated with such armed struggles—and the overall track record of such operations, as seen

Figure 1-4. Armed Conflict by Region, 1946–2013

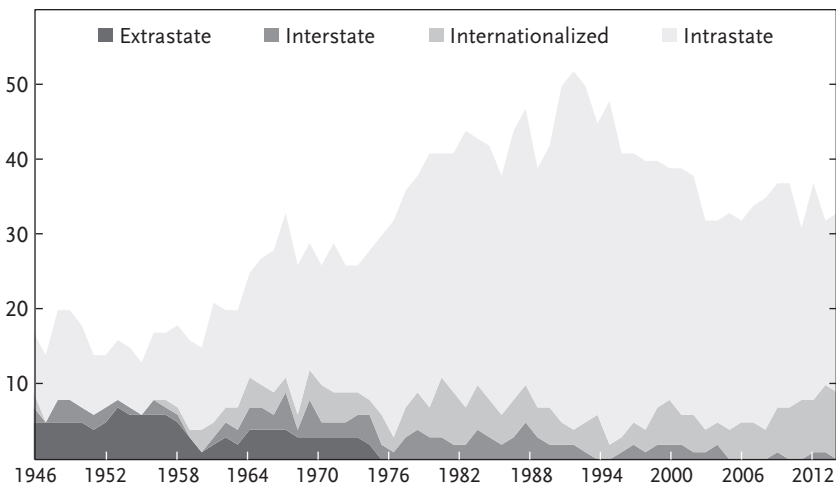
Number of conflicts



Source: Lotta Themnér and Peter Wallensteen, “Armed Conflict, 1946–2013,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 4 (2014) (www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_prio_armed_conflict_dataset/).

Figure 1-5. Armed Conflict by Type, 1946–2013

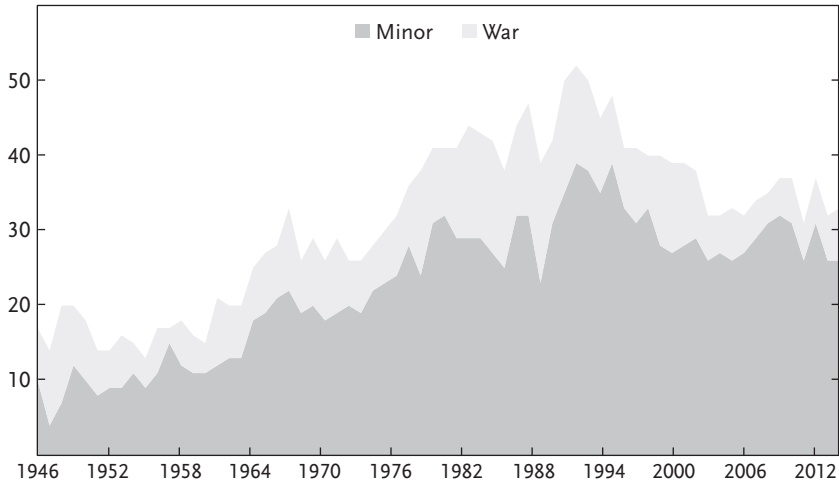
Number of conflicts



Source: Themnér and Wallensteen, “Armed Conflict, 1946–2013.”

Figure 1-6. Armed Conflict by Intensity, 1946–2013

Number of conflicts



Source: Themnér and Wallensteen, "Armed Conflict, 1946–2013."

from Mozambique to Cambodia to El Salvador, is passably good, if far from unblemished.⁵⁸

What of stopping genocide? Again, this is a mission that could be important. In theory, under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention and the more recent Responsibility to Protect doctrine of the UN, and in light of its own historical lessons and moral scruples, the United States would seem to have a strong predisposition to intervene quickly to stop genocide. President Clinton's lament about not having taken action to stop the 1994 Rwanda genocide, the world's collective shame at not having stopped the Holocaust, and a number of other cases are salient reminders of the high moral stakes involved in watching the mass slaughter of human beings from the sidelines.⁵⁹ All that said, it is important to be realistic. Not all genocides are anywhere nearly equal in scope to each other. Moreover, some hypothetical genocides would be unrealistic to stop, because attempting to do so might well fail or might lead to even greater loss of life than the genocide itself. Invading a nuclear-armed country to protect one of its oppressed minorities is a case in point.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons or fissile materials is another potentially grave threat. A half century ago, John Kennedy famously

predicted that the world could see twenty nuclear weapons states within a few years. That claim, happily, has not been borne out, but enough proliferation has occurred to have increased the dangers and reminded one of the risks of a greater spread of the bomb.⁶⁰ But can the United States really prevent it? The post-cold war era has provided conflicting evidence and arguments about the inevitability of proliferation—and the international community’s willingness to take forcible action to stop it. After Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the United States discovered Iraqi nuclear weapons programs that had been developed after the Israeli 1981 Osirak preemptive attack, and spent much of the next dozen years trying to ensure Iraq could not reconstitute such programs, an effort that culminated in the invasion of 2003. But that very year, as the prevention of nuclear proliferation helped justify a major military operation in the Middle East, North Korea’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its subsequent presumed acquisition of a small nuclear arsenal elicited no comparable response—just nine years after then Secretary of Defense William Perry had warned Pyongyang about the potential military consequences of a nuclear breakout attempt.⁶¹ Pakistan and India tested the bomb in 1998, and while no military response was plausible or appropriate, they were at least significantly sanctioned at the time. But by the early years of the twenty-first century, those sanctions had been trumped by more pressing geostrategic concerns of a different nature, and were dropped. Sanctions were lifted on Qaddafi and Libya when Qaddafi gave up his nuclear technologies and aspirations, but then the message was somewhat muddled in 2011 when he was overthrown for other reasons. The United States and other countries have worked hard to find a diplomatic deal with modern Iran partly because of the mediocre prospects of a military strike intended to eliminate the nuclear program through force rather than negotiations.⁶² On balance, preventive wars to stop proliferation seem rather unlikely in most cases.

Relatedly, American military power might in theory be used to punish any state that used nuclear weapons in a future conflict. The tradition against nuclear weapons usage could be seen as very important to uphold. But again, there are counterarguments. If, for example, the country that had used nuclear weapons had many more of them than initially employed, the higher priority might well be to deter further use rather than to punish the perpetrator of the initial attack. Thus, any punishment might well be exacted in economic or other nonmilitary terms.

What about the threat of terrorism? Generally, after the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, it seems likely that the United States will confine itself to the use of limited tools of military force, such as drones and special forces, in addressing this danger. However, there could be scenarios in which a major use of American power might seem the lesser of two dangers. The possibility of a terrorist group someday obtaining weapons of mass destruction is a chilling thought that could make the conflicts of 2001 to 2015 seem relatively modest in the threat they actually posed to Western society. Indeed, for a time in the fall of 2001, there was a credible if low-probability concern that a nuclear weapon might be smuggled into Manhattan and detonated, and officials involved in that experience recount to this day the deep anxiety it caused them.⁶³

Thus, thinking through a taxonomy of possible military missions should leave us agnostic. There are many categories of hypothetical operations about which American planners, politicians, and citizens should remain wary, and should try to avoid. Yet at the same time it would be difficult and unwise to dismiss most types of operations outright and categorically.

THE UNITED STATES, U.S. GRAND STRATEGY, AND THE COURSE OF HISTORY

Beyond such specific considerations based on types of military missions, it is helpful to ask, what broad goals should U.S. power be seeking to advance on behalf of the nation? Only with such a perspective can land power be directed to serve the most important national security interests of the United States.

Over the years, a number of possible theses have been advanced to help policymakers make sense of the confusing and multiheaded course of world history. They include the following:

—Democracy is spreading quickly, and with it, the prospects for peace, since established democracies do not tend to fight each other.

—Nuclear deterrence will largely guarantee great-power peace.

—Economic interdependence will make great-power conflict such a nonsensical notion as to render the chances of interstate warfare even lower than in the recent past.

—Nuclear proliferation will make the world more dangerous, and other trends in technology in areas such as microbiology and robotics and additive manufacturing (3-D printing) could do the same.

—Burgeoning populations, combined with the effects of global climate change, will lead to new types of conflicts over water, resources, and territory.

—Strong American leadership can, as it has since World War II, help preclude the prospects of great-power competition and thereby help keep the peace, especially in areas of the global commons crucial to commerce and trade.

—Fraying American strength and leadership, and the rise of China, as well as of other powers, will make the world more anarchic and thus more dangerous.

All of these theories are serious. All have very thoughtful proponents; all capture at least a kernel of truth about international politics and war. But they have their limitations as well.

The theories that would seem to promise less conflict, while hardly lacking in merit, and supported by the general trends of reduced violence in recent decades, particularly at the interstate level, do not guarantee a peaceful planet in the future.⁶⁴ For example, it is true that the overall frequency of interstate violence has declined greatly and that casualties from all types of war (particularly when adjusted for the size of the Earth's population) are down substantially. But deterrence can still fail owing to misperception about commitments, the ascent to power of risk-prone leaders in key nations, enduring historical grievances that resurface at a future date after a period of quiet, and disputes over resources of one type or another.⁶⁵ Here we should think of Vladimir Putin and his recent behavior, or the leadership of Iran, or the ongoing rivalries between the Koreas and between India and Pakistan.

Moreover, there have been more than thirty civil wars in the years since the turn of the twenty-first century. This remains a higher figure than in much of the twentieth century.⁶⁶ Estimated fatalities from those wars, typically 20,000 to 40,000 annually in recent years, according to the Peace Research Institute Oslo at Uppsala University in Sweden, are substantially less than from the civil wars of the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s but not appreciably less than those of the 1950s and certain other periods. In other words, there may be a generally hopeful trend toward decreased global violence, but it is hardly so pronounced or so definitive as to foretell an obsolescence of armed conflict.⁶⁷ Moreover, civil wars are very difficult to resolve definitively, and often recur even after peace accords are in place.⁶⁸

There were still some seventeen UN peace operations globally as of 2014, involving more than 100,000 personnel in total. Additional non-UN missions continue in other countries. Total numbers of peacekeepers, under UN auspices and otherwise, have consistently grown in this century even without counting the Afghanistan operation.⁶⁹ In places such as Syria and Iraq, serious violence continues. Largely as a result, world totals for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain high. More than 10 million refugees are under the care of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (down from an early 1990s peak of 18 million but much greater than 1960s and 1970s totals), with the largest numbers from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These same countries, along with Colombia, have large numbers of IDPs as well. Indeed, global totals for IDPs are at historic highs, with more than 25 million under UN supervision and care and a grand total of more than 30 million worldwide. Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey host the largest number of refugees from other countries. All told, forced displacement in 2013 topped 50 million globally for the first time since World War II.⁷⁰

Terrorism broadly defined has increased dramatically in this century by comparison with the latter decades of the twentieth century.⁷¹ And technology, as well as their tools of mobilization and organization, make terrorists more dangerous too. As Philip Bobbitt argues, for the first time since the creation of the state, nonstate entities can truly threaten the core security of societies.⁷² Some extremist movements are now able to hide away within the world's great and growing megalopolises to a greater extent than many previous insurgent or rebellious movements in history. In so doing, they can gain access to information, communications, transportation systems, funding, and recruits.⁷³ President Obama frequently talked about al Qaeda being on the run or on the path to defeat in 2012 and 2013, but that optimism was premature at best, and could really only be said to apply to the traditional core of the organization that attacked the United States in 2001.⁷⁴ Al Qaeda affiliates remain active in dozens of countries, and the success of the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant throughout much of Syria and then in northern and western Iraq in recent years has been stunning.⁷⁵

When all these points are taken together, it seems clear that theories about the supposed obsolescence of land warfare need to be viewed warily.⁷⁶ It is also important to note that most countries do not seem to

consider land warfare obsolete. They concentrate many of their military resources on land forces. As noted, out of the 20 million or so active duty military personnel under arms worldwide today, nearly three-fourths are in ground forces.

In regard to the so-called democratic peace, it is true that established, functioning constitutional democracies fight each other much less often, statistically speaking.⁷⁷ It is also true that such countries are becoming more common, with about 120 countries, or nearly two-thirds of the nations of the planet, electoral democracies by the turn of the twenty-first century. However, even such countries are not impervious to the possibility of civil war (as the American Civil War showed), or to a possible coup or hijacking by a strongman, who then misrules the state (as Hitler's hijacking of the Weimar Republic demonstrates), or to other aberrations. The extraordinary popularity of Vladimir Putin in Russia since 2014, even if partly fabricated and engineered by the Kremlin, should alone throw some cold water on any excessive optimism about the hypothesis that empowering the average man and woman will produce naturally peaceful nations. Egypt's extremely turbulent steps toward what may or may not prove a more democratic future provide another timely reminder. Moreover, the world has many prominent nondemocracies or partial democracies—North Korea, as an extreme case, but also Iran and China, and in total about 35 percent of the world's population. Democratic peace theory may work well for established, inclusive, constitutional democracies based on the liberal principle of the rights and worth of the individual. However, such states are rarer than are electoral democracies in general.⁷⁸

The notion that nuclear deterrence has created a world in which major powers are less likely to engage in all-out war against each other is probably true. Such a war would make it highly credible that an attacked or invaded state, its very survival on the line, would be prepared to use nuclear weapons in self-defense. However, nuclear deterrence would seem less dependable in cases where states consider or engage in limited war (which may or may not remain limited once they start) or in situations in which one of them has a disproportionately greater interest than the other in regard to the issue that precipitated the crisis at hand and is therefore willing to risk brinkmanship, in the belief the other side will blink first. In other cases, conflict could erupt in which renegade local commanders may have their own agendas, or in which command and control systems

for nuclear weapons are less than fully dependable.⁷⁹ Moreover, the history of nuclear deterrence has not been as easy or as happy as some nostalgically remember it being. There were near misses during the cold war, with the Berlin and Cuban missile crises. The spread of nuclear capabilities in places such as South Asia and the Middle East increases the odds that the tradition of nonuse may not survive indefinitely.⁸⁰

Then there is the hope that economic interdependence and globalization will make the idea of warfare so irrational and unappealing as to ensure no major conflict among the great economies of the world. There is indeed some basis for this observation. But of course, international investment and trade were strong at the turn of the twentieth century as well, yet did not suffice to prevent the outbreak of World War I. Also, nations historically have proven able to convince themselves that future wars will be short (and victorious), allowing for the creation of narratives about how conflict would not preclude prosperity. To be sure, in today's world of global supply chains, and with the memories of the world wars now informing policymaking, it may be hard to make that case. Yet it is worth remembering that joint economic interests among nations have existed for centuries, even as war has continued.⁸¹ And some economic factors may increase the chances of conflict at times, such as by providing resources with which extremist regimes could undertake aggression or by setting the stage for conflict over valuable contested assets.⁸²

Certain elements of modern warfare—the sophistication of some militaries and thus the speed with which they can maneuver and conquer, the availability of standoff weapons and robotics—may encourage countries to again think war can be quick and relatively painless.⁸³ They have often mistakenly concluded as much as a result of technological advances in the past. In other words, even if, as argued above, the so-called RMA is typically overrated, some leaders may believe the hype enough to think they have found a magic bullet for future warfare—leading them to undertake aggression.

On balance, it is probably true that war has become at least somewhat less likely as a result of the sum total of nuclear deterrence, the spread of democracies, globalization, and other factors, including the destructiveness of modern conventional weaponry.⁸⁴ But that provides no grounds for complacency. The overall chances of war could be lower than before and the duration of time between catastrophic wars longer, yet the potential damage from conflict could be so great that war might remain just as

much a threat to humankind in the future as it has been in the past. For example, even a small-scale nuclear war in a heavily populated part of the planet could wreak untold havoc and decimate infrastructure that might take years to repair, with huge second-order effects on human well-being for tens of millions of individuals. This is especially true in a densely populated world highly dependent on complex economic interrelationships not only for its prosperity but for the provision of its more immediate human needs, such as food and medicine. Nuclear accidents could themselves be severe, whether caused by war or not. Biological pathogens far more destructive than the generally noncontagious varieties that have been known to date could be invented. And the effects of climate change on a very densely populated globe could have enormous implications for the physical safety and security of tens of millions as well. The case for hope about the future course of the world is fairly strong—but it is a case for hope, not a guarantee.⁸⁵

And that hope for a better future is almost surely more credible with a strong United States. To be sure, there are differences of opinion over how U.S. strategic leadership should be exercised. Some do express concern that specific mistakes in U.S. foreign policy could lead to war.⁸⁶ There is also disagreement over whether the concepts of American primacy and exceptionalism are good guides to future U.S. foreign policy.⁸⁷ But there is little advocacy of the notion that a multipolar world would be safer than, or inherently preferable to, today's system, or that a different leader besides the United States would do a better job organizing international cooperative behavior among nations, or that anarchy would be preferable to a more structured and organized international system.

Today, the United States leads a coalition or loose alliance system of some sixty states that together account for some 70 percent of world military spending (and a similar fraction of total world GDP). This is extraordinary in the history of nations, especially by comparison with most of European history of the last several centuries, when variable power balances and shifting alliances were the norm. Even in the absence of a single, clear threat, the NATO alliance, major bilateral East Asian alliances, major Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf security partnerships, and the Rio Pact have endured.

To be sure, this Western-led system is under stress and challenge. U.S. debt as a fraction of GDP is quite high relative to levels economists consider healthy (publicly held debt exceeds 70 percent of GDP) and

is expected to rise substantially as entitlement spending growth likely accelerates in coming years. Middle-class income levels have stagnated as manufacturing jobs have declined dramatically in recent decades owing to automation and globalization. More recently, sequestration and related budgetary cuts have curbed key investments in infrastructure, research, and education. Many of America's allies in Western Europe as well as Japan are in even worse shape, with declining populations auguring badly for GDP growth in the decades ahead. Meanwhile, a number of emerging economies, China in particular, have advanced in leaps and bounds. Finally, for all the spread of democracy and the death of communism as a meaningful ideological competitor, the very model of the Western state, with its free-market capitalism and individual, secular liberties, may have lost a certain appeal in large swaths of the world.⁸⁸

But it is still worth taking stock of the fact that this Western community of nations exists, and remains impressive, with income levels far superior to those of China or Russia and with far more collective investment in new ideas and new technologies than any other group of nations. It also has survived as a community, if a loose one—even after the disputes over the Iraq War during the George W. Bush administration. The form of leadership provided by the United States, while sometimes contentious and sometimes costly, seems to appeal to U.S. allies and partners around the world. Most seem to believe that America has their back, so to speak, at least on core matters of national security and survival. This is reflected in the facts that most U.S. allies do not pursue their own nuclear weapons programs or engage in arms races or preemptive attacks against potential adversaries. To be sure, there is sometimes a high price to pay for maintaining U.S. credibility, and it is probably not always worth paying in each and every conflict the nation has engaged in. There is a danger too, in that failed signaling about commitments can produce deterrence failure, and then bring in the United States, widening or even globalizing a conflict that might otherwise have stayed local, at least temporarily, as in Korea or Vietnam. (More generally, in history, big wars have often begun as small, localized wars that metastasized.)⁸⁹

But taking a broad perspective, the overall trajectory of the international community since World War II has been highly unusual by historical standards and highly beneficial to the planet. Robust American backstopping of the liberal order, and particularly its security and stability, has produced considerable dividends—even if other factors, such as

nuclear deterrence and the spread of democracies, have likely contributed to the general peace among major powers as well. The survival of this community of nations over many years, even after the dissolution of the Soviet threat, suggests a certain widely perceived benefit to the type of international leadership, and protection of the global commons, that the United States provides.⁹⁰

Part of the reason for this community's longevity is surely that it operates in a way that allows individual nations to make their own choices, in real time, about when and how they will employ force in defense of the interests of the broader community of states as a whole. The U.S.-led Western security community is neither a coercive system nor a rigid one. The strategist Joseph Nye writes of the paradox of American power, underscoring that the very success of the United States in leading a large coalition of states arises from the fact that it cannot and generally does not try to do so with a heavy hand.⁹¹ And a global distribution of power aligned in such a unipolar way—with the term “unipolar” referring not to the United States itself but to the broader system of alliance partners—is steadier and probably less conflict-prone than most alternatives.⁹² The notion that a “balance of power” helps reduce the chances of war is not borne out by history or by military analysis, partly because it is so hard to construct balances of military power that are truly robust.

None of this prejudices the role that U.S. land power should take in upholding the international order. More specific analyses of various regions of the world and various possible military contingencies are needed for that purpose—a task to which the rest of this book now turns. But I take it as a premise in the chapters to come that U.S. leadership and international engagement are desirable, even as the nation must remain highly selective about how it employs its military power in the upholding of that order and in protecting American interests at home and abroad. To foreshadow the book's conclusions, this is not an argument about whether or how the United States might consider a large military buildup or renew the degree of military activism witnessed in the first dozen years of the new century. Rather, it is about whether the nation should hold the line near current levels—roughly a million-soldier army, of which about half are in the active force and half in the reserve component, as part of an overall U.S. military spending level that will soon decline to 3 percent of GDP—or be cut even further. The latter option, as I attempt to show, would be unwise.

We now turn to a survey of where conflict, or other large-scale disorder or disaster, could plausibly erupt around the world in coming years and decades. With that survey complete, chapters 3 and 4 then sketch out a number of scenarios that might, under certain assumptions, lead to the large-scale use of American ground power—or where a U.S. capacity to deploy such capabilities in extremis might usefully reinforce deterrence. Chapter 5 pulls these pieces together to develop a long-term vision for the future U.S. Army.